

THE SOLDIER'S SON.

It was at a fierce and critical period of the war in the Peninsula, that General Morillo, then commanding a Spanish army, about 4,000 strong, passed down the Portuguese frontier to the lower Guadiana, intending to fall on Seville as soon as Marshal Solt should advance to the succor of Badajoz. In the beginning of April, while the French were disheartened by the sudden news of the fall of that city, Morillo, issuing out of Portugal, crossed the lower Guadiana and marched toward Seville.

But the hopes of the Spaniards of being speedily in possession of Seville were cut off by a piece of deceit. False information, adroitly given by a Spaniard in the French interest, led Morillo to believe that Solt was close at hand, whereupon he immediately retired to Gibraltar.

The disappointment and failure in the execution of a favorite project, cherished for many months, irritated beyond control the naturally severe temper of General Morillo.

It was evening, and the division of the army under him were encamped some hours' march on their retreat. Preparations might have been seen for a military execution; a couple of French prisoners captured in the last skirmish were, according to the cruel practice of many chiefs in those times, to be put to death. The captives were guarded by file of soldiers, and the executioners, waiting the word of command to draw up, were leaning on their weapons and talking of the events of the last two days.

Just then, one of the inferior officers returning to his tent, after giving some orders to the men, was interrupted by a boy, apparently ten years of age, who seizing his hand and speaking in an accent slightly foreign, besought him, with piteous entreaties, to procure him admittance to the general. The officer found, on inquiry, that he was the son of one of the prisoners, a soldier distinguished for his eminent personal bravery, who had not been taken, even when overwhelmed by numbers, without giving and receiving many severe wounds.

This soldier, wearied and wounded, but invincible in courage and spirit, scorned to ask clemency of his conqueror, and was now to suffer death with his companions in misfortune. The terrible order had been given, for Morillo would not be impeded in his march by prisoners, and he so hated the French that the bravest and most generous among them would have found no mercy at his hands. The prisoner's little son, refusing to be separated from his father, had been suffered by the Spaniards to follow him.

"You shall see the general, boy, since you wish it," said the officer in reply to the child's passionate entreaties; "but he will not grant your father's life. San Lucas! but these French dogs have given us too much trouble already."

They entered the general's tent. Morillo, by the light of a lamp burning on the table, was reading a dispatch that he had just received. Two of his officers stood next him; there was no one else in the tent. The brow of the chief was contracted, and his eyes flashed as if what he read was displeasing to him; he looked up with an impatient exclamation as the officer entered with the boy. The child, as soon as Morillo was pointed out to him, rushed forward, and knelt at his feet.

"What does this mean?" demanded the general angrily.

"Spare him! Spare my father!" sobbed the frightened boy.

The officer explained his relationship to one of the prisoners about to be executed.

"Ah, that reminds me," said the chief, looking at his watch; "Pere, nine is the hour. Let them be punctual, and have the business soon over."

Again, with moving entreaties the child besought his father's life.

"Did your father send you hither?" asked the general.

"No, senior, he did not."

"And how dare you, then?"

"My father has done nothing to deserve death," answered the lad. "He is a prisoner of war."

"Ha! Who taught you to question my justice? Answer me, presuming youngster."

"No one, senior, but brave generals do not always kill their prisoners."

"I kill whom I choose!" thundered Morillo; "and I hate the French. Boy, your father shall die! I have said it; become from my sight!"

The officer made a silent sign to the petitioner, to intimate that there was no hope, and he must be gone. But the boy's countenance suddenly changed. He walked up to the general, who had turned away, and placed himself directly before him, with a look of calm resolution worthy of a martyr.

"Hear me, senior," said he; "my father is gray-haired; he is wounded; his strength is falling even now, though he stands up to receive the fire of your men. I am young and strong and well. Let them shoot me in his place and let my father go free."

It was impossible to doubt the sincerity of this offer, for the face of the devoted son was kindled with a holy enthusiasm. A dark flush rushed to the brow of Morillo, and for a moment he looked on the boy in silence.

"You are willing to die," at length he said, "for your father. Then to suffer pain for him will be nothing. Will you lose one of your ears to save him?"

"I will," was the firm reply.

"Lend me your sword, Father," and in an instant, at one blow, this humane Spaniard struck off the brave boy's ear. The victim wept, but resisted not; nor raised his hand to wipe away the blood.

"So far good; will you lose the other ear?"

"I will to save my father!" answered the boy convulsively.

Morillo's eyes flashed with an unholy light, his heroism of this child compelled his admiration; but unmoved by his cruel purpose he smote off the other ear with his still ringing sword.

There was a dead silence.

"And now, senior," said the boy breathing quickly and looking up to the general's face.

"And now," answered Morillo, "depart. The father of such a child is dangerous to Spain; he must pay the forfeit of his life."

The maimed child went forth from the presence of this brutal monster. Presently the report of firearms announced that he had witnessed the execution of his father.

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